



Flaming Guns Is Cut-'em Up Comedy, But First Day of School Flunks As Sex Farce.

By Elaine Liner

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Ken Birdsell



Sally Soldo, Gene Raye Price, Emily Jackson and Justin Vorpahl fire up the comedy in *Flaming Guns of the Purple Sage* at Theatre Too.

Details:

Flaming Guns of the Purple Sage continues through August 8 at Theatre Too. Call 214-871-3300.

The First Day of School continues through July 25 at the Fort Worth Community Arts Center. Call 817-923-3012.

Subject(s):

[Theatre Too](#), [Fort Worth Community Arts Center](#), [Terry Dobson](#), [Sally Soldo](#)

By the time the ladies of Theatre Too's *Flaming Guns of the Purple Sage* start sawing up the body of a villainous Ukrainian drug

dealer named Black Dog, the strange charms of this outrageous piece of grindhouse comedy will have firmly grabbed hold of your senses. Not known for taking risks on out-there material like this, Theatre Too, the smaller playhouse below Theatre Three in the Quadrangle, buzzes right along with this oddball 95-minute script by Jane Martin. There's beer drinkin', screwin' and killin' in this play, sometimes all at the same time.

Flaming Guns offers a weird, wonderfully warped tribute to the "Code of the Cowboy" movie genre of the 1930s, those Hopalong Cassidy and Roy Rogers flicks where the bad guys go to Boot Hill and the good guy rides into the sunset with his sweetheart. There are a couple of good guys in the play. Rob Bob, a rodeo champeen recovering from an injury, is played with kicked-in-the-head vacuity by University of North Texas student Justin Vorpahl, making his professional acting debut. (It's hard to tell whether Vorpahl is brilliant at pretending to be a dumb guy or if he's just the right bad actor for the dumb guy role.) Deputy Sheriff Baxter Blue, played by another Dallas theater newcomer, Dan Ramsey, doesn't appear until the second act, but he gets there at just the right moment to turn the action upside down.

As small-space farces go, *Flaming Guns* packs plenty of action. Things open with a bang. Rancher Big 8 (Gene Raye Price), a tough-as-whang-leather old broad who heals broken rodeo men through TLC and rockin' sex, is cooking eggs with Rob Bob, her latest cowboy-toy. With the subtlety of a F-5 tornado, they're interrupted by She-Devil (Emily Jackson), an angry punk-goth chick with pink-tinted hair, a Southern twang and a twinge of Tourette's. The feisty girl, shriek-sneezing

cusswords, tells Big 8 her tale of woe. Seems Big 8's son, the never-seen Lucifer Lee, left the girl broke and knocked up in LA. She needs a place to stay, and by the way, if that one-eyed demon biker Black Dog (Jordan Willis) shows up, nobody should mention the thousands of dollars of drug

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money She-Devil stole from him.

With Tarantino-esque timing, Black Dog makes his fearsome appearance at the end of the brief first act. He's gone midway through the second—unless you count the bloody parts of him stuffed into all those garbage bags stage left.

Call it Grand Guignol soap opera or a drive-in horror picture come to life, *Flaming Guns of the Purple Sage*, directed by Terry Dobson (and reviewed at a preview), blends grisly gore with highly entertaining comic hysteria. The cast is aces, starting with Ms. Price, a regular in One-Thirty Productions' homespun comedies, who goes full-bore into her role here as the ballsy, blowsy Big 8. With a voice that sounds like bacon frying, Price gets maximum pop from her character's folksy putdowns of lesser mortals. "You put her brain in a bluebird," she says of She-Devil, "and it'd fly backwards." And about her son: "Lucifer Lee's so stupid, he can't roll rocks down a steep hill."

As Big 8's sister Shirl, Theatre Three regular Sally Soldo takes a break from prim-and-proper nice-lady roles and has a ton of fun throwing herself into broad gestures and human vivisection. She and Price have priceless chemistry.

Emily Jackson, a student at the University of Oklahoma, has some good moves as She-Devil, but her comic timing isn't as sharp as the pros she's acting with. As Black Dog, Willis is allowed few lines of dialogue, though his terrifying physical presence speaks volumes. Silver-haired Dan Ramsey plays the lovestruck deputy with an appealing twinkle. And in a brief appearance as Big 8's next rehabber, cutie pie Collin Duwe wears white jeans so tight he must need Crisco to get into them.

Rodney Dobbs' set meets all the technical challenges of a play that requires busted-down doors and blood-spattered appliances. Lighting by David Gibson doesn't try anything fancy, which is just fine.

With *Flaming Guns*, playwright Jane Martin (a pen name widely assumed to belong to former Actors Theatre of Louisville director Jon Jory), pays loving homage to old-timey Saturday afternoon shoot 'em ups, low-budget midnight movies and maybe *Arsenic and Old Lace*. The good guys, and the audience, win in this one. It's Theatre Too's best production in eons.

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A premise is no more a play than a grocery list is a meal. It's a starting point, a jumping-off place. ***The First Day of School***, being done now by **Amphibian Stage Productions** at the Fort Worth Community Arts Center, has a mildly amusing premise: Five parents drop off their kids at school, then, at a loss for how to spend the day once the PTA brunch is canceled, decide to have an orgy. And that's it for the next two hours. A premise in search of a play. No detours into darker ideas, no meaningful explorations of the ramifications of what 1960s swingers called the "zipless fuck." Just one thin gag about nerdy suburbanites being fumbling, living-room sex fiends.

Playwright Billy Aronson, short of original ideas, likes repeating the same tawdry bits, as if one more reference to a cold cucumber up the wazoo will be funnier than the same line uttered by the same character two minutes earlier. Long monologues substitute for real dialogue. All three recruits to the sex party dreamed up by husband David (Patrick Bynane) and wife Susan (Molly Lloyd) launch into streams of blather about why they would never agree to such a thing—that is, before they do.

Best at selling Aronson's underwritten fluff is New York actor Marshall York, whose gigantic head and spindly bod make him a walking Feiffer cartoon. Mugging, twitching, writhing on his knees, York, playing Peter, the "cool dad," delivers his five-minute soliloquy like a desperate man making his case to a firing squad. He's funny to watch; the material's dumb.

The rest of director Evan Mueller's cast is trapped in a mishmash of acting styles. Bynane and Lloyd, as the couple who decide offhandedly to try sex with other people instead of running errands, do that thing of staring too intently at each other when they talk. Real people don't do that, only bad actors do. Lloyd, a small woman who leads with her teeth, is less annoying in the second act, but not enough to matter.

Playing mommies looking for thrills, actresses Krista Scott and Desiree Fultz look embarrassed and awkward in the group-grope scenes (which are supposed to be funny but are anything but). Both are consigned to unflattering outfits by costumer Aaron Patrick Turner.

The second act finds the characters on the fourth anniversary of their annual five-way screw. Only now they're bored with the old moves. Enter the cuke.

Late in the play, a teenage couple (Sydney Baumgart, Alex Bush) bent on losing their virginity come home early to find the grown-ups in *dishabille*, a development that hints at a better play that might have been a hybrid of *American Pie* and *Bob & Carol & Ted & Alice*. As it is, *First Day of School* merely offers a two-hour lesson in how to eff up a sex farce.